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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001948

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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

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SUBJECT: GON CRITICIZES EMBASSIES FOR NOT GETTING OUT THE
GOOD NEWS ON THE NIGER DELTA

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs Robert Gribbin for reasons 1.4. (b & d)

1. (C) Summary. In a September 5 briefing for the Diplomatic Corps in Abuja, Foreign Minister Maduekwe and other senior officials described the GON's efforts to address the problems of the Niger Delta and improve the security situation there. The officials described the government's "holistic approach," which included stepped-up development efforts, increased efforts to consult with local stakeholders, peace talks with militant groups to bring them into the process, and military operations against those "criminals and miscreants" who would not lay down their weapons. Unfortunately, details of these efforts were not provided. Maduekwe and the other officials complained that Nigeria was not receiving sufficient credit for its efforts, and blamed "inaccurate reporting" by foreign diplomats for perpetuating the view that the Delta is a dangerous place. Diplomats were invited to visit the Delta and see the improved situation for themselves. In a very brief question and answer session (which was originally supposed to be the centerpiece of the meeting), the UK, Syrian and US COMs asked questions, which largely went unanswered, about better communication during incidents of hostage-taking, how military operations against militants were working, and how efforts to reach out to local people were coordinated. End summary.

2. (U) On September 5, Foreign Minister Maduekwe convoked the Abuja Diplomatic Corps to discuss the GON's plans for addressing the situation in the Niger Delta. At the meeting, the ForMin, Rivers State Governor Omehia, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) Chairman Edem, and NDDC Managing Director Alaibe all addressed the assembled ambassadors, but most substantive remarks were made by the ForMin and Alaibe.

Development Plans for the Delta

3. (U) The ForMin described a series of meetings which President Yar'Adua had held since his election with the nine state governors from the Niger Delta and NDDC leaders "to discuss measures aimed at fast-tracking the implementation of the infrastructural components of the (15-year) Master Plan" previously established for the region. The participants agreed that the NDDC would focus on major projects like road construction, and leave the development of "welfare projects" such as schools, clinics and hospitals to state and local governments. In his own remarks, Alaibe added that the participants had reviewed the Master Plan, and identified a

number of priority projects, funds for which were to be allocated in the 2008 budget.

¶4. (U) According to Maduekwe, the participants also agreed that the international oil companies would be asked to do more to assist in the Delta's development. Maduekwe dismissed what these companies had done thus far as "sheer tokenism" and "too little, too late."

Security Issues

¶5. (C) The ForMin said the GON had adopted a holistic approach to the search for peace and stability in the Delta which included not only accelerated development efforts, but also negotiations (spearheaded by Vice President Jonathan) to convince at least some of the militants to lay down their weapons, coupled with stepped-up military operations by the Joint Task Force (JTF) to put pressure on those "criminal elements" who would not. He stressed, however, that these operations were "carefully calibrated and measured" so as to minimize civilian casualties and respect the human rights of local people (Comment: We question whether the Nigerian military is capable of such subtlety. End comment). Maduekwe argued that, as a result of these efforts, "the security situation in the Niger Delta today has improved significantly based on the decisive steps taken by the Government to put an end to wanton acts of criminality and brigandage."

¶6. (U) Alaibe expanded on these points, describing the "peace and conflict-resolution committees" that were trying to reach out to people in the remote creeks and convince them to come into talks. He cited the recent release of some imprisoned

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militant leaders as addressing a key militant demand, and said most militant leaders had been won over by these efforts. He claimed VP Jonathan had been personally involved in the talks, and had played a positive role.

¶7. (C) Alaibe said the government understood that it needed to consult all stakeholders and be sensitive to local concerns if it was going to restore stability to the Delta. He pointed to the recent pushing back of the start time for the nighttime curfew from 6pm to 9pm as evidence that the government was trying to pay attention to human rights and local grievances. (FYI: The earlier start-time for the curfew had led to many travelers being shaken down for bribes at checkpoints. End FYI.)

Not Problems, Just Bad Reporting

¶8. (SBU) ForMin Maduekwe contrasted what he described as this considerable improvement in the situation in the Delta with what he viewed as "inaccurate reporting" by some diplomatic missions. He noted that some embassies had issued travel warnings to their nationals against visiting the region, but insisted that "the criminal actions of a few fortune seekers. . . do not warrant the designation of Nigeria as a perilous environment." He argued that such travel restrictions create a "Catch-22 situation," since they kept out international development experts, yet everyone agreed that development had to be a key part of any solution to the Delta's problems.

¶9. (SBU) Turning to the problem of kidnapping, Maduekwe said it was "a hideous crime" which was "even more despicable" when children were its victims. No government could tolerate "such odious criminal and terrorist acts perpetrated by a few miscreants." He added, however, that foreign missions needed "to report the efforts of our law enforcement and our government against these criminals; this will allow investors to make an informed judgment about the situation here."

¶10. (SBU) The other participants in the panel all reiterated the view that foreign diplomats were exaggerating security problems in the Delta, and not

giving the GON sufficient credit for what it has been doing to improve the situation. Alaibe appealed for the assembled diplomats to tell their governments and businesses of the improved situation, and the "bold, bright and beautiful future for the Niger Delta." Rivers State Governor Omehia argued (with no irony apparently intended) that, despite the curfew in his capital, Port Harcourt, there was "peace in Rivers State," which he urged the diplomats to visit so they could look for ways to partner in its development. NDDC Chairman Edem also urged diplomats to visit the Delta for themselves, so they could see just how "over-exaggerated" the reports of security problems were.

Question and Non-answer Session

¶11. (U) What, according to the agenda, was supposed to be a 50-minute "interactive discussion" between the panelists and the diplomats was shrunk to 10 minutes because of a late start and the length of the formal presentations. Only three diplomats (from the UK, Syria and the US) were able to put forward questions.

¶12. (U) The acting UK High Commissioner noted that 34 Britons had been kidnapped in the Delta since January 2006, of whom 33 had now been released. He asked for continued efforts to secure the release of the 34th, and asked if the GON could provide diplomatic missions with a point of contact to keep them regularly informed of what was being done about such cases. The Syrian Ambassador reiterated this latter point, noting that one of his nationals had died while in captivity, but stressed that it was hard to get information out of the GON which he could use to inform his government and people back home.

¶13. (U) The ForMin responded that the GON was not just expressing good intentions on security, it was committed to the "nitty-gritty" of getting it right. "Hostage taking makes us feel terrible," he said, adding that cases, like the recent one of a little British girl, were an embarrassment to Nigeria, given the coverage they received on the BBC and CNN. As for improving communication (and apparently missing the

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point of both questions), Maduekwe said the GON needed to do a better job of telling its own story, using its own diplomatic missions to put the word out.

¶14. (U) In his question, CDA noted the crucial importance to everything the government was trying to do of progress toward resolving the problems of the Delta, and thought efforts to reach a political settlement there sounded appropriate. As for the security situation, CDA asked how the ongoing military operations by the JTF were improving the security in the remote creeks of the Delta and the efforts to win over the people there.

¶15. (U) Governor Omehia commented that the presence of the JTF in his state did not mean there was no peace in the region. He argued that the JTF would remain in the area until peace was "consolidated."

Comment

¶16. (C) When this meeting was called, our concern was that the Nigerian presentation would be long on rhetoric and short on specifics. Unfortunately, that is what we received. President Yar'Adua is, in fact, trying to do more to improve the situation in the Delta, and we are certainly eager to be helpful in that regard, but attempting to blame the GON's problems there on "inaccurate reporting" by foreign embassies is simply a non-starter. The verbiage and grandstanding for the domestic audience notwithstanding, we see that the new government has indeed put its prestige on the line in committing to improve the situation in the Delta. This alone should ensure the continuation of real efforts to work the problem and, if no success is registered, will make

finger-pointing, and perhaps even accountability, easier.
End comment.
GRIBBIN